

Travel and Adventure: Mendocino and the color purple

by John Blanchette

MENDOCINO, Calif. - The point of my trip to Mendocino was to judge a wine competition at the Mendocino County Fair. I managed to sample 125 of Mendocino's finest wines - and end up looking purple all over like Barney the dinosaur - but I also discovered that there's more to this part of California than what gets poured into a glass.

VINE VALLEY - Vineyards rise up the valley hills of Mendocino County, Calif. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. CALIFORNIA COASTLINE - Abalone fisherman snorkel under kelp beds for their quarry along the pristine Mendocino coast. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. TOWERING TREE - A visitor marvels at the magnificent redwoods that tower hundreds of feet straight up, forming cathedrals in the woods. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. SPECIAL OF THE HOUSE - Sally and Don Schmitt, former owners of the French Laundry restaurant in Napa, Calif., show off their prized chutney at their Apple Farm stand. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. Mendocino County caps Sonoma like a cork, about 90 miles north of San Francisco. Rural, breathtaking and abundant, 90,000 inhabit this sparsely populated, rolling landscape composed of six fertile valleys. About the size of Rhode Island, it is a farming and ranching Eden that has embraced counterculture lifestyles and given birth to an active artistic community.

There is a history of lawlessness in this isolated pocket of Northern California. The land was initially settled by European immigrants who found riches in the land, not in the mines, following the gold rush of the mid-1800s. This was where Black Bart, the notorious stagecoach robber, terrorized travelers and intercepted shipments of gold bullion on its way to the banks in San Francisco.

During Prohibition (1920-33), wine, beer and other spirits brewed in the county supplied the speakeasies of the Western United States. And the hippie migration in the late 1960s brought marijuana farmers into the mountainous valleys to produce the area's most valuable, if illegal, crop.

The town of Mendocino, which sits on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, was once the busiest port in California. Founded by New England fishermen and loggers, the town has the look of a Maine coastal community and has been a star in a number of Hollywood films, most notably "East of Eden" and "Jaws."

Beautiful Victorian homes bear witness to the wealth that was created from the timber industry, which remains the No. 1 legal economy of the area, followed by tourism and the wine industry.

After the earthquake and fire of 1906 that destroyed San Francisco, the wood that rebuilt the city was shipped by boat out of Mendocino harbor from the forests surrounding the town.

Some of the magnificent coastal redwood forests have been saved from the logger's ax and state parks are open to the public for hiking and camping. It is a humbling experience walking through the cathedral created by the 1,000-year-old trees soaring hundreds of feet straight up in the air.

The Skunk Train leaves from the town of Ft. Bragg on a 21-mile tour through the redwoods (\$20-\$55) or you can hike a one-mile trail through Hendly Woods State Park and enjoy the majesty of the forest in quiet.

Mendocino produces large crops of apples, pears and berries, mushrooms and grains. Livestock farming of sheep, goats and cattle adds dairy products, meat and wool.

This abundance often finds specialty food producers offering cheeses, crafts, juices, ciders, jams, jellies and chutneys. Two of the best are the Apple Farm in Boonville, owned by the former proprietors of the French Laundry in Napa, Sally and Don Schmitt. Their son Johnny operates the Boonville Hotel. And Carol Hall's Hot Pepper Jelly Company in Ft. Bragg does mail-order sales.

The ocean is also a great provider. There is an abundance of abalone, mussels, crab, salmon and rockfish.

If you want a little change from wine, Mendocino has a rich history of brewing. The town of Hopland was named for the chief ingredient in beer, and the first brew pub established after prohibition still operates in

town, the Hopland Brewery. You can also take tours of the Mendocino Brewing Company and the Anderson Valley Brewery.

Although traffic can be heavy on the small roads that run through Mendocino wine country, it is the best way to move from valley to valley. The roads are curvy and can be treacherous if you get too involved with the jaw-dropping views or don't drink responsibly at the tasting rooms.

The agricultural economy is led by wine grapes, but nearly 70 percent of the crop is sent south to Napa and Sonoma for bottling by larger vineyard operations.

However, the wine industry has been undergoing a revival and rapid change in recent years. It is the largest area in the country for organically grown wines. Of the 17,000 wine-growing acres, 18 percent are organic, and many young growers have brought life back to the industry, which "stood still too long," according to Fred Buonanno of Philo Ridge Vineyards.

Two members of the Fetzer family, John at Saracina Vineyards and Daniel at Jeriko Estate, and other young winemakers are bringing Mendocino back to the forefront of the California wine industry. Major producers include Barra, Bonterra, Frey, Baxter Winery, Husch Vineyards, Nelson, Greenwood Ridge (which produced my favorite Pinot Gris), Handley, Edmeades Estate, Navarro, Roederer and Scharffenberger (magnificent champagnes), Parducci, Jepson and others. Seventy vineyards and 325 grape growers make up the Mendocino Winegrape and Wine Commission.

Rising from the purple haze of competition, this year's "Best of Show" winners were the 2005 Londer Vineyards Pinot Noir (Anderson Valley) in the red wine category, and a surprise winner in the white wine division, a 2006 McNab Ridge French Colombard. They earned a lot of purple prose from the writers.

There are very few traditional hotels and motels in the county. Tourist housing is mostly found in beautifully appointed bed-and-breakfasts and country inns. Some of the nicest are the historic Hopland Inn, built in 1890, the Boonville Hotel, the Heritage House Inn, MacCallum House and the Little River Inn.

The Stanford Inn emphasizes the vegetarian lifestyle and has a large garden in the center of the complex where much of the food served at the inn is grown.

Stevenswood Resort is eco-friendly and has incredibly comfortable beds with down pillows and quilts. A wood-burning fireplace and contemporary bathroom with Italian features completes the room. There is a full spa offering various treatments and massage techniques and an outdoor Jacuzzi. Chef Randy Lewis, a James Beard Award Winner, heads up the restaurant.

Just south of the town of Mendocino is the family-run restaurant Ledford House. Tom Geer takes care of the front of the house, which features a full bar and live jazz. His wife Lisa is an accomplished chef who uses local produce in innovative ways.

IF YOU GO

For information on housing, restaurant options, art, music, food and wine festivals throughout the year, museum and gallery guidebooks, brochures and maps, contact the Mendocino County Promotional Alliance at www.gomendo.com, or look for the quarterly magazine Mendocino Travelers Guide at www.mendocinoguide.com, a free, exhaustive and attractive publication on things to do in the county.

The Mendocino Winegrape and Wine Commission's Web site lists wine-related activities and details on the vineyards and tasting hours, www.mendowine.com.

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